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Strange orange lights reported in the skies over Lowell, Dracut

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LOWELL — "Uh huh. Right sir. Strange orange lights. You say you counted 13 or 14. Got it. Out of formation? Yeah. One of them hovered you said? And they looked like they were heading toward Dracut. Okay. Thanks for calling."

Then the phones at The Sun started ringing off the hook last night, between 10:15 and 10:45. More than a dozen people called.

They were from Pawtucketville, Centralville, and Dracut, they said, and they all reported a group of eerie lights. No one mentioned unidentified flying objects, but that's what they thought they saw.

They called police too. Lowell Police reported at least a dozen calls around the same time, all saying the same thing. Dracut Police got two calls; same time; same phenomenon. One couple drove up to Dracut PD headquarters. Wouldn't leave their names. Didn't want anyone to think they were crazy, one cop said.

There were several theories: Air National Guard planes dropping equipment with lights attached at Fort Devens; government high atmospheric tests; maybe even a meteor shower.

Two Sun reporters, more than a little skeptical, drove off toward the University of Lowell's north campus, where most of the "sightings" were coming in from.

Nothing there.

But the calls kept coming in. From Sparks Street, Exeter Street, the VFW Highway, Martin Street.

One man called from his Pawtucket Boulevard apartment. He was driving along the VFW Highway when he saw it. Several cars pulled over and watched, he said.

"They were big balls of light, about 30 of them. They moved very slow," he said. "One went vertically, the rest horizontally. They were headed from Lowell toward Dracut, right over the (Aiken Street) bridge."

Other callers said they counted either 13 or 14 yellowish-orange lights. No sound, and all of them headed east or east-northeast.

"Weird, huh?" one male caller said after giving a similar description. Several callers wanted to make sure they weren't the first to telephone The Sun. "You getting many calls about funny lights up around the Tech School?" one asked.

Michael Miles, a civilian CETA worker manning the phones at Lowell Police headquarters, said there were a dozen calls from people of varying ages and both sexes, mostly in Pawtucketville and Centralville.

"They sounded pretty authentic," Miles said. He called the UFO hotline in Evanston, Ill.

Then, The Sun called the UFO hotline in Evanston. The hotline operator said the Lowell PD call was the only call they received. They passed the information along to the UFO information center, also in Evanston, "in case there was a landing," she explained.

Dracut Patrolman Peter Apostalas said a couple in their mid 30s drove up to the front of the station to report "a formation of 15 or 20 balls of light, like orange balls of flame going out toward the Kenwood section (in east Dracut). They seemed fairly serious," Apostalas remarked.

One Dracut Police officer called The Sun this morning and said he saw the lights too. Unfortunately, he's been getting grief from loved ones ever since, he said.

Another Dracut officer said callers refused to give their names when they reported the lights.

"They wouldn't tell me so I wouldn't think they were crazy," he said.

A check of military and scientific groups in the area turned up some interesting theories, the most plausible of which was that C130 transport planes dropped off materiel at Fort Devens about 15 miles from Lowell. The equipment dropped by parachute, has "illuminous lights attached to the 'chutes," says Gary Sebring, an aircraft dispatcher at the Fort.

"I'll bet that's what they saw. I've been doing C130s for 15 years, and people see all sorts of things," he said.

"It was a nice night out with plenty of stars; the visibility was probably 20-30 miles," Sebring said. The drops were made from an altitude of 1,250 feet, and depending on where someone was, the lights on the parachutes could have looked bright yellow or pale yellow, he added.

The C130s were out of the Rhode Island Air National Guard base in Warwick, but Capt. Stephan Stubits there said he thought the equipment had green, almost chartreuse-colored lights. There were four drops at Devens between 8:50 and 9:45 p.m., two planes each time dropping heavy equipment and sandbags, Stubits said.

Also, he thought there might have been some C123 transports out of Westover Air Force Base in western Massachusetts making drops at Devens last night. Maj. Robert Hafner at Westover said this morning there were no drops in this area last night, however.

A check of the Federal Aviation tower in Nashua, N.H., which monitors all air traffic in New England turned up no explanation for the Lowell-area reports.

Astronomy Professor William Pinson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which operates the Haystack Observatory in Westford, confirmed there have been meteor showers recently.

"But they're not a very spectacular thing. It would have to be a real dark night and you would have to look hard to see them," Pinson said.

However, he recalled a few years ago when government high-atmospheric testing in Virginia was visible in southern New Hampshire. The firings released greenish barium vapors and yellow-orange sodium vapors high in the atmosphere, he said. Maybe something like that was what people in Lowell and Dracut saw last night, he theorized. "I'm not saying that's what it was," he cautioned.

Nobody could.